

# Managing absence



Of course, you want to be fair if a team member is sick, but you still need to set out clear parameters so everyone from manager down to trainee knows exactly what to do – and what happens – if they have the sniffles

**E**mployees who are absent from work are often missed by their employer, but when an employee's absence can take a setting from being within ratio to out of ratio, it becomes an absolute priority to manage absence effectively.

And, across the UK, all sectors are reporting that absence levels are on the rise again. Indeed, the CIPD / Simply Health Absence Management Survey for 2013 reveals that, after a small decrease reported in the previous year's survey, absence is back up to the levels observed in 2010 and 2011, at an average of 7.6 days per employee. Interestingly, what it demonstrates is that absence levels tend to increase with organisation size, regardless of the sector.

## A right to sick leave?

Employment law in relation to absenteeism is quite clear. No one has a right to be off work through sickness, but employers must act reasonably and not discriminate when managing absenteeism. Still, employees whose absences take them away from work on a regular basis for one or two days at a time are always going to cause an employer more pain than an employee who

takes four weeks recovering from an operation. So, I would recommend employers adopt a different approach to managing these two different types of absence.

## Your absence policy

First and foremost, when managing absence, your priority is to have a clear absence policy. It prevents accusations that you are singling someone out and clarifies in advance what will happen if anyone is absent.

It's important to ensure that all employees are issued with a copy of the policy when they start their employment with you, for, while the contract of employment will confirm their entitlement to any sick pay, your absence policy will go into more detail about how absence should be reported, by when and to whom. You can contain the absence policy within an employee handbook or issue it at the same time as your staff read and sign for other policies and procedures in your setting.

## Make it work for you

Ensure your absence policy states when and how you would like to be notified of any absence. Many people think it's acceptable to text a manager



if they are unfit for work. I would say that, unless it works for you and you like them to communicate this way, you should ask that they phone you in person. I'd also emphasise that it should be the employee that reports the absence unless the circumstances are unusual – otherwise, you may find that you have spoken to someone's parent or partner rather than your member of staff.

This is important, for, when someone else reports an absence on behalf of a staff member, you miss the opportunity to clarify with them whether the symptoms have been around for a while; whether they could have been contagious at work; when they expect to be fit to resume work.

Identify too a time that you would like the employee to report their absence, say, by 8.00am, so you can legitimately contact an employee after this time to express your concern as to where they are. Failure to report absence in accordance with the policy and repeated poor attendance could be grounds for disciplinary action.

## Short-term absences

When an employee's absence is short term, the most effective way of addressing the problem is the return-to-work interview. Whether it's to check that your employee is indeed fit to return or to make sure that s/he recognises the impact their absence has had on the team, this interview is a powerful intervention.

## The WARM approach to return-to-work interviews

### Welcome them back –

- Find the opportunities. While there are companies out there who can provide this service, there are government and council-run sites to get you started - for example, Contracts Finder ([www.gov.uk/contracts-finder](http://www.gov.uk/contracts-finder)) - which are free.

### Absence –

- What was the reason for absence?
- Have there been any similar absences in the past?
- Is it likely to recur?

### Responsibilities –

- Is a risk assessment required?
- Can you make any adjustments to the working environment / working practices?
- Are there any further doctor's / hospital appointments or treatments – how will they be arranged and attended?
- Is the employee taking any medication that you need to know about or that could affect their performance? If bringing it to work, where will it be stored?

### Moving On –

- Summarise what has been discussed
- Action plan (if required)
- What's going to happen next (There could be disciplinary action in line with the sickness absence policy.)?

When introducing return-to-work interviews, it's important to train your supervisors and managers to conduct them fairly and to ensure that they have developed active listening skills. You will also find that a form to complete and a set of standard return-to-work interview questions can be very effective.

### Long-term absences

With long-term absences (four weeks plus), a strategy of home visit or absence-review meetings and a referral to an occupational health adviser or a request to approach their GP for a report can be very effective. If you want to be able to refer your staff for independent medical examination, you should ensure that this is covered in the contract of employment. You must also be prepared to meet the cost of this.

For home visits, I always recommend, where possible, a minimum of two managers attending and that the meeting is followed up by a letter confirming what was discussed and what happens next. Absence-review meetings - very useful when discussing a phased return to work - are very similar, except that the employee comes to the workplace or a neutral location for the meeting. Again, these

meetings should be followed up with a letter.

As with a return-to-work interview, there is a skill in conducting an effective home visit or absence-review meeting. The best approach is to listen more than talk, and to ensure you do not discriminate within the meeting. I would also advise never to make threats or promises, as both are dangerous in different ways. Regardless, employees may wish to seek reassurances that you just can't give at the meeting. So, if they ask a question you can't answer, always tell them that you will respond when you can.

Writing to an employee for their permission to approach their GP under the Access to Medical Reports Act 1988 is quite a formal process. The employee must be made aware of their rights under the Act, and a

GP won't issue the report unless s/he has proof that the employee's rights have been explained.

Consent can be given in two ways. An employee can give full consent, which means there will be no delay in the report being sent to the employer, as the employee doesn't want to see it first. Alternatively, in the case of partial consent, the employee has 21 days from the date the report was requested to visit the surgery to see it.

### At work but not working

In the current economic climate, more and more employers report issues of 'presenteeism' rather than 'absenteeism'. 'Presenteeism' is where an employee presents themselves for work when they are really too unwell to attend. With the introduction of 'fit notes' in 2009, you are within your rights to review the GP's recommendation and decide whether or not you can accommodate an employee's return to work.

In many settings, there is no such thing as light duties. So, if you can't accommodate the recommendation, then the employee remains unfit for work. Infection control policies where an employee is not allowed to return to work until they are 48-hour symptom-free from certain sickness bugs work as a strategy to deter many from taking odd one-day absences. ■

### Further reading

*Absence Management Pocketbook* by Max Egbert (pub Management Pocketbooks Ltd, 2009). Pocket sized, but punches above its weight for relevant content and sound advice (available from Amazon at £8.32 at time of publication).

- Following the birth of her son, James, Imogen Edmunds launched Redwing Solutions to provide HR consultancy to SMEs in the West Midlands. Nine years later, she has become well known in the West Midlands childcare and day nursery community for her practical, expert advice and guidance and the friendly way in which she supports her employer clients.

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